
The Circle of Life

Genesis 25:1-28

Introduction A few years ago, Disney produced what has become a classic animated movie. *The Lion King* told the story of passing of one generation and the coming of another with the wonderful music of Elton John. It was based on African tales but had a distinctive New Age message in the story and in the lyrics. Many people believe in the underlying myth – that death and birth are the keys to the circle of life.

When we read our Bibles, we are struck both by the reality of death in a fallen world and the wonder of life in birth. So while death and life are a part of our world, they are not its essential truths. The round and round of birth and death moves time and history forward. At the heart of birth and death is birth and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The circle of life linking two generations of families unfolds in this text. One generation goes home to God and the next gives birth to twins. Let's think about this together.

Growing Old with Grace

(v.1-18)

Alexander Solzhenitsyn reflected on growing old with grace in these words:

Aging is in no sense a punishment from on high, but brings its own blessings and a warmth of colors all its own. There is warmth to be drawn from the waning of your own strength... You can no longer get through a whole day's work...but how good it is to slip into the brief oblivion of sleep, and what a gift to wake up once more to the clarity of your second or third morning of the day... You are still of this life, yet you are rising above the material plane. Growing old serenely is not a downhill path but an ascent.⁷

This is a grave challenge (pardon the pun) for many. How do you grow old with grace? How do you keep from becoming cranky, complaining, self-focused and self-centered? How do you, in Piper's phrase, "grow old with God?"

What I want to observe from Abraham is the richness of his own end. While Moses does not intend to provide a manual for Christian seniors, he does show us the wisdom and winsomeness of a man whose life is "full of days".

Providing for His Own

(v.1-6)

Moses records that Abraham marries Keturah who was never more than a concubine-wife (1 Chronicles 1:32). She gives him 6 children whose families are also recorded. Each of these become tribes and eventually, people groups, known to Israel as they are preparing to enter the Promised Land.

⁷ Cited by Kent Hughes, *Genesis*, Crossway Books, p. 325.

As he approaches death, Abraham is careful to secure the rights and inheritance of Isaac. He designates him as the true heir and actually transfers ownership of all to him. To the sons of his concubines he lavishes them with gifts, the word here indicating extravagant wealth. He then sends them away into the east country leaving the Promised Land to Isaac alone. All this is recorded for the sake of Israel as they approach the Promised Land to conquer and settle it and for the sake of the descendants that they might understand whose land it actually is.

Abraham then secures the covenantal promise for Isaac. He believes God in an obeying way. Once again, and I emphasize this, Abraham's faith causes practical actions. He believes Isaac is the son of promise; he believes the land is theirs; so, he ensures that Isaac alone inherits and inhabits the land.

Believers have a responsibility in this area as well. We are not the heirs of physical land, but of heaven. Believing God means that we do what we can to ensure that the spiritual heritage God has given us is transmitted to our children. So we guard the gospel and we give the gospel in hope that God will be pleased to grant grace to our children.

Further, we have a responsibility, as much as lies in our power, to ensure that our children actually receive what God has been pleased to entrust to us. This believing and obeying God means we do the practical things in our culture of keeping our wills up to date, taking advantage of asset preserving tax shelters and teaching and training our children on being good stewards. Next month, during stewardship month, we will be conducting practical workshops during our evening services to help you believe God in an obeying way over these issues.

Going Home to God

(v.7-11)

Abraham lives 38 years after Sarah died, his life full and complete. His last years are not a decline, but an ascent. I love the language here: an old man and full of years. He goes home to God and is gathered to his people. His sons, Isaac and Ishmael, gather to bury him beside his beloved wife.

Moses records that the inheritance Abraham gave Isaac is accompanied by the blessing of God. This is God's affirming Isaac's status. The blessing of God lies with those who are in the covenant. Isaac then settles where God has manifested himself.

As we contemplate the departure of beloved senior saints, let us consider them full of years. The frailty of Helen Duncan and the weakness and sickness of Jim Feustal all should draw out care and compassion as we watch people full of life prepare to go home to God. God measures out our lives. God knows the instant of our conception and the moment of our death. The cycle of life is in His good, wise and sovereign care. No one's death is a surprise to Him. This is both something to comfort us and to sober us. My friend, do you know the length of your days? And when the parting moment comes, are you going home to God?

Settling Outside the Homeland (v.12-18)

As a final securing of the covenant and its promises, Moses bookends the death of Abraham with Ishmael's descendents. He appears at the funeral, but is not an obstacle to Isaac receiving what was his. Ishmael and his twelve sons inhabit the region to the west and continue, in their generations, to be "over against" all their neighbors. This is not a location phrase, but a relation phrase showing that his descendents turn out to be what God has said to his mother.

But God still blesses Ishmael on account of Abraham and God's promises to Abraham. He has twelve sons, comparable to Jacob's twelve later. They all become leaders over tribes, just as Israel will have later. But the blessing, while real, provides a counterpoint and a counterfeit to Abraham's descendents. They will eventually challenge and even go to war over the land. This conflict which has marked the middle-east has extended even to today.

Giving Birth with Pain (v.19-34)

The second element in the cycle of life is birth. This chapter is a massive transition in the book of Genesis. The Abraham section is closing and the Isaac section is beginning. In three chapters, the life and character of Isaac is unfolded for us. We do not have a biography here; Isaac is largely seen as a praying and spiritual man who is also oddly weak and self-indulgent.

Situations that are Difficult (v.19-21)

As with his father, Isaac's wife is barren. She has no children. She and Isaac are the line of covenantal descent. So this is a grave concern. They are married when he is forty (v.20). They are married for almost 20 years without children (v.26).

But we have seen Isaac to be a man who communes with God. So he prayed to God – prayers based on God's promises. The word is used elsewhere in the Old Testament to speak of entreaty and agonizing. It is linked to sacrifice and worship. Isaac is not just casual about his request and its need. He is passionate before God. We don't know how long he prays. But we can be encouraged in our own praying that God may interrupt our prayers with immediate answers like the servant in the prior chapter. Or God may, because of His agenda and purposes, allow us to pray for years before granting what He has promised.

Situations then can be difficult because of the need. They can be difficult because of the intensity of our prayer to God. They can be difficult because of the waiting for God to intervene and act.

God is pleased to answer. Rebekah conceived and is carrying twins. So while Isaac and Rebekah are the designated covenant recipients, God wants to demonstrate that His giving of the heir is at His own timing and with His direct intervention. God's providences may be in the natural and ordinary flow of life. Sometimes, God's providences are direct and even miraculous. In both of these last two chapters, we see men of God, desiring and even needing God's intervention, praying with earnestness based on the character and the commitments God has made. This makes Biblical praying different from all others. We are not, through ritual means, trying to satisfy a distant and uncaring deity. We are en-

gaged with the Sovereign God who is poised to hear, yet acts in accordance with His own counsels of wisdom and purpose.

Struggles that Need Help

(v.22-23)

But from the beginning, there is trouble. The twins are struggling together in the womb. Some translations soften this into words like “jostled”. The Hebrew is much more powerful than that. It is the idea of a titanic struggle – smashing into one another. After 20 years of childlessness, now her pregnancy is horribly difficult. The children almost seem to be battling in her womb. The narrative here begins to anticipate the life-long struggle between these boys.

It is terrible for Rebekah. She has no answer in the normal course to explain the problem. It seems that she sought help. No one can give a human answer for why this enormous struggle which she would have experienced primarily as pain, discomfort, gyrating movement. Can you imagine trying to sleep or even function normally like this? She reaches the end of her rope with the “If pregnancy is like this, why did I want it?” It is possible at this point that she does not know that it is twins. She only knows the terrible discomfort and pain she is experiencing.

So, she inquires of the Lord. Commentators are divided as to whether this is an inquiry through a prophet or whether this is direct. The language here seems to me to be direct. She is struggling. She goes to the Lord seeking an answer. And the Lord answers her.

This is oracle speech. He uses the paired couplet common to Hebrews poetry. In effect, God sings His response. Two nations and two peoples, one stronger than the other, the older serving the younger are trashing about in her womb. This is not just a physical problem, but the titanic struggle of redemptive history, in this moment of time, focused in her womb.

This text is loaded with theological truth which the rest of the Bible unpacks. At the heart of that is God’s sovereign and free choice to elect the younger instead of the older, Jacob instead of Esau. In the natural order, Esau would be the heir. The lineage would pass through him. But, in God’s sovereign freedom, he chooses Jacob instead. He does so, according to Malachi 1:2, not because he saw anything in them, but because of His own freedom to choose and love whomever He pleases. *I have loved you,* says the Lord. *But you say, “How have you loved us?” “Is not Esau Jacob’s brother?” declares the Lord. “Yet I have loved Jacob. [ESV]*

Paul reads this cluster of texts and writes in Romans 9:6-18:

But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, ⁷ and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” ⁸ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. ⁹ For this is what the promise said: “About this time next year I will return and Sarah shall have a son.” ¹⁰ And not only so, but also when Rebecca had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, ¹¹ though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad— in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call— ¹² she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” ¹³ As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

¹⁴ What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! ¹⁵ For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." ¹⁶ So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. ¹⁷ For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." ¹⁸ So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. [ESV]

Paul sees here that God has exercised His free choice before either of the boys have sinned or done anything right or wrong. The conclusion they draw is massive. God is free to set His heart on whomever He pleases. He does so of His own will, not foreseeing any of their actions and not based on their worth or merit. This weighty (and to some, worrisome) truth is not just applied to these two boys, but to Israel as a nation, to Jesus as the elect servant and then, by Paul to individuals.

Sons who are Different

(v.24-28)

She perseveres and the boys are born. "Behold, it is twins!" The oracle is now very clear. There are two of them. No wonder the trouble, No wonder the pain and discomfort. And look at them. Look at how different they are.

Moses means for us to see more here than just a physical description of Esau at birth. He describes him in a way that is almost animal-like. It is intended to have the audience sort of draw back – here is a baby that at birth is covered in red hair, like a fur cloak. The word for red here is closely associated with earth. He is of the dirt; he is Adam-like. So, this red haired baby is called Esau. Also, these two words, red and hairy, are forms of the words Edom and Seir. This boys descendants would be known as Edomites and would live in the region called Seir. They would become the mortal enemies of Israel.

Jacob is born second. But he comes out grasping the heel of Esau. The struggle in the womb goes on at birth. He is named Jacob. It is from a word that means, "God will protect" and "standing behind". That word and Jacob's name rhymes with the word for "grabbing the heel." So, at this point, the astonished and happy parents, recognizing the fulfillment of the oracle, name their son with a positive name.

But the word has another meaning as well. Imagine my consternation in Germany to finding out that the German word pronounced like my name (albeit spelled different) means, "an elephant's trunk." It accounts for the occasional perplexed look when Germans asked me my first name. Jacob also means, "deceiver, supplanter, sneak." Someone who grabs another by the heel is attempting to trip them up, to cause them to stumble. So he will become famous in the psalms as the one God loves, you sinner, you worm, Jacob.

Verse 27 tells us that the boys were not only different at birth, but also grow up to be very different in their character and conduct. Esau becomes an outdoorsman. Jacob, a homebody. But there is more here. Esau is being described as wild and uncouth, a man ruled by his wants, his immediate perceived needs. Jacob is being described as tamed, controlled, civilized, a man of thought, reflection and self-control.

The hearts of their parents start to be exposed – Isaac loves the hunter because he brings him his favorite game; Rebekah loves Jacob, presumably because he is a quiet man around the “tent”. But the division between the boys begins to drive a wedge between the parents. They will carefully look out after the interests of the one they love the most. This will lead later, to a whole nest of deceit, intrigue and hatred.

As we close, how does the circle of life impact us so that we will be pleasing to our God? **Lessons**

An important idea emerges from this text and shapes the rest of the Bible. The New Testament book of Hebrews talks it in language like, the Old is passing away and the New is being established. Just as God chooses the younger and supplants the older, so the Old Covenant is fulfilled and completed in the New Covenant. God is pleased to carry out all that He has promised, centering it on the Lord Jesus and completing it in the church.

A word of warning to parents. At some level, favoring one child over another is just human – we all do it. But the way we respond to our children is often over the top and thus is expressing and exposing our hearts. We may love our wild meat too much. We may crave for the delicious company of kids around the kitchen table. God’s Word exposes these loves as cravings and inordinate affections – they will become the root from which many evil fruits will spring. Love your children – but love them in a way that is grounded in your identity in Christ, is graced by your love for your spouse and guided by the principles of God’s Word.

There is a circle of life – redemptive history centers on the birth and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Why is that? Because the great problem for people is not psychological wholeness, self-esteem and worth, health, wealth and prosperity. Your greatest problem is not the gas prices, the job market, the latest rap song, or funky hair. Your greatest problem is your sin and the separation from God. It is what the Bible calls, spiritual death. This alienation, this separation from God will end ultimately in your separation from God in the eternal torments of hell. But Christ has come, died on the cross and was raised from the dead so that you can be restored to a relationship with God. But it requires that you believe and bow: that you believe in God and these facts and that you bow to God as Lord and Master of your life. This is your day to end the cycle of death and enter the circle of life, the circle of eternal life with God.

In new Age mythology, the circle of life is just the endless repetition of birth and death. But the Bible teaches that the circle of life is under the wise, good and purposeful hand of a sovereign God. He loves with a sovereign freedom, chooses as He pleases and brings about the good of His people and His own great glory. This is our Ruler and Redeemer – worthy of our love and adoration.